

# Sweet Auburn

## Growing Up in Black Atlanta

*"Auburn Avenue was like a grand lady," recalled one journalist. "In her prime she was the talk of the town—young, vivacious, and beautiful. Everyone loved her, respected her, and wooed her."*

Atlanta in the early 20th century was a mosaic of communities shaped by the people within their bounds. Auburn Avenue was the main artery through one neighborhood that came to symbolize prosperity for African Americans.

After the Civil War, ex-slaves bought property east of the city's central business district in the low-lying area of Wheat Street and Butler Street (now Jesse Hill Jr. Drive). By 1881, Butler Street was the center of an area known as

Darktown, sandwiched between Courtland and Jackson streets. Business owners and factory workers alike took pride in their surroundings, putting up houses, office buildings, and places of worship in late-Victorian architectural styles.

By 1893 white residents, concerned that "Wheat Street" was viewed as a black neighborhood, petitioned the city council to change the name to Auburn Avenue. The area grew to be a mixture of old and young, prominent and plain, and black and white—until the race riot of 1906 revived segregation.

In 1909 the Reverend A.D. Williams and his wife purchased a large home on predominately black Auburn Avenue. As pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Williams was not only an elo-

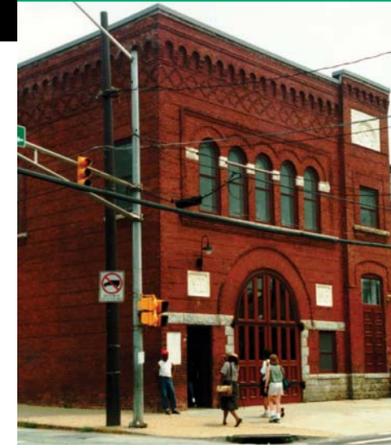
quent speaker, but a political activist who actively supported organizations dedicated to the education, social advancement, and well-being of African Americans. After Rev. Williams died in 1931, his son-in-law Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., took over as Ebenezer's pastor. But it was Rev. Williams's grandson whose name would become synonymous with the civil rights movement in America.

On January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born at his grandparents' home, 501 Auburn Avenue. Young M.L. lived with his grandparents, parents, brother, sister, and other close relatives. Their neighbors were businessmen, porters, teachers, millworkers, clergymen, domestics, and laborers. Nearby were banks, insurance companies, real estate agencies, medical and law

King Birth Home

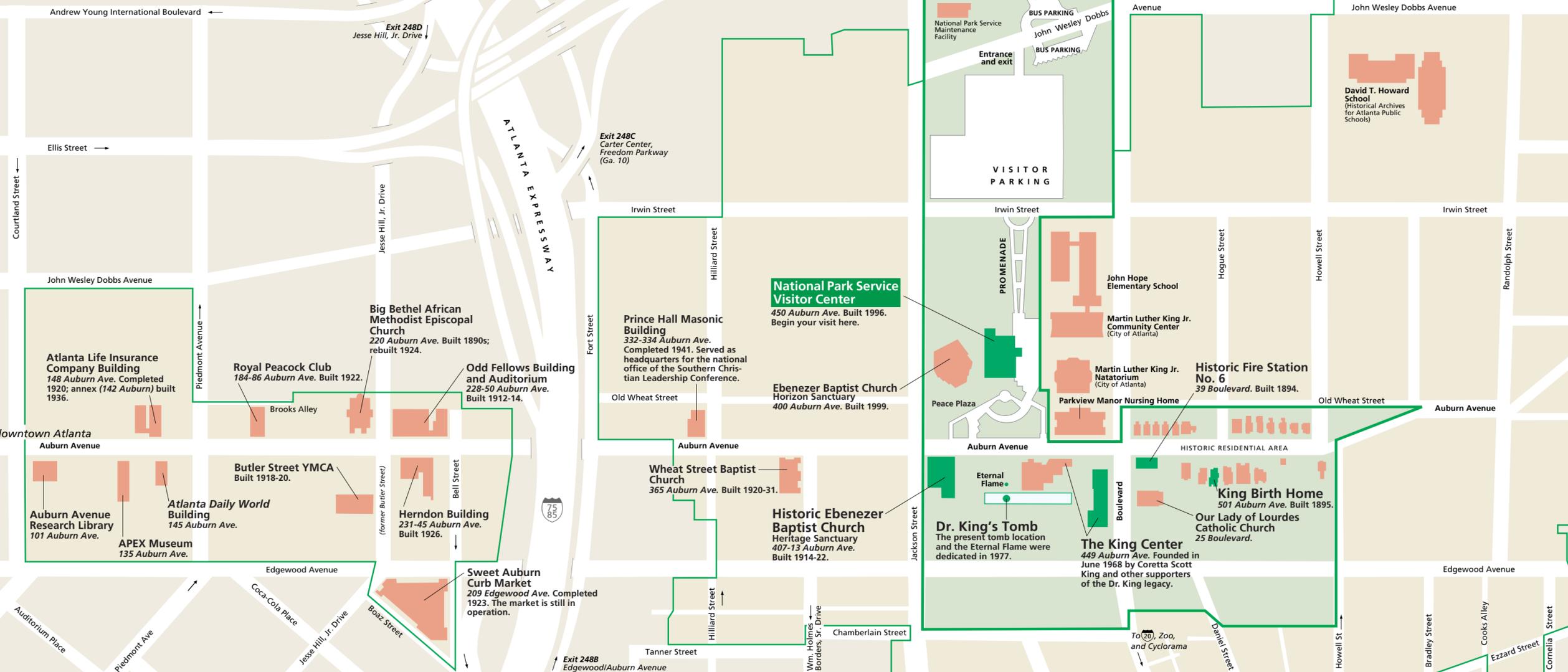


Fire Station No. 6



offices, funeral parlors, a drugstore, library, and business college—all black-owned or black-operated. Despite Atlanta's segregation laws, political leader John Wesley Dobbs was inspired to call the area "Sweet Auburn." Years later his grandson, Mayor Maynard H. Jackson, added that Sweet Auburn had offered African Americans "the three B's—bucks, ballots, and books!"

Dr. King never forgot the community spirit he had known as a child. Nor did he forget racial prejudice. He returned in 1960 to serve with his father as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist and to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And, as the world mourned on an early spring day in 1968, it was to Sweet Auburn that the body of Martin Luther King, Jr., was brought one last time.



## Planning Your Visit

Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site was established in 1980 in order to protect and interpret for the benefit, inspiration, and education of present and future generations the places where Martin Luther King, Jr., was born, where he lived, worked, and worshiped, and where he is buried. Park sites include the visitor center, Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, The King Center (Dr. King's Tomb and Freedom Hall), Fire Station No. 6, and the Birth Home. Book and gift sales are available at each site except the Birth Home.

**The Preservation District** Surrounding the national historic site is the preservation district, which helps to maintain the historic integrity of Sweet Auburn. This is still an active community. Most buildings within the national historic site and preservation district are privately owned and are not open to the public.

**The National Park Service Visitor Center** Begin your visit here. Ranger will answer questions and provide orientation to the park. The visitor center has museum, interactive exhibits, and films about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement.

**Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church (Heritage Sanctuary)** Built 1914-1922. (Nearby Horizon Sanctuary was completed in 1999.) Martin Luther King, Jr., and his sister Christine were baptized at this church in 1934. Dr. King was ordained into the Baptist Ministry here, joining his father as co-pastor from 1960 to 1968. As the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr. King used the church's meeting space to plan civil rights strategies based on the principle of non-violent direct action.

Ebenezer was also the scene of tragic episodes. On April 9, 1968, Dr. King's funeral was held at Ebenezer. In June 1974 Dr. King's mother was fatally shot while playing the church organ for Sunday morning worship.

**The King Center and Dr. King's Tomb** Dr. King's body was moved here from Southview Cemetery in the early 1970s. The present site was dedicated in 1977. Take some time to reflect at Dr. King's grave-site. Personal artifacts and timelines related to Dr. King and other non-violent social activists are displayed at Freedom Hall.

**Historic Fire Station No. 6** Built in 1894, this is Atlanta's oldest standing firehouse. The museum that tells the story of desegregation of the city's fire department. On display is a 1927 La France fire engine, the type that young Martin would have seen.

**The King Birth Home** 501 Auburn Avenue, built 1895. Martin Luther King, Jr., was born here on January 15, 1929, and lived here until age 12. The house is restored and furnished look like it did in the 1930s and 1940s.

**Getting to the park** From I-75/I-85, take exit 248C (Freedom Parkway, Carter Center); turn right onto Boulevard; take immediate second right onto John Wesley Dobbs Ave. to bus/visitor parking. From I-20, take exit 59A (Boulevard, Cyclorama, Zoo); go north on Boulevard for almost two miles; turn left on John Wesley Dobbs Avenue. to parking. **Mass transit system:** At the MARTA Five Points Station, take Bus No. 3, Auburn Avenue/M.L. King Jr. Drive eastbound directly to the park; or take the MARTA East-West Rail Line to the King Memorial Station. Auburn Avenue is about one mile north of the station from Jackson Street.

The King Center



Ebenezer Baptist Church



**Hours of operation** The park is open daily except for Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Winter hours are 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Summer hours are 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. All park sites are self-guided except the King Birth Home. Ranger-conducted tours of the home are offered year-round. Each tour is limited to 15 people and available first-come, first-served. To make sure you get on a tour, register early in the day at the visitor center.

**More Information**  
Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site  
450 Auburn Avenue, NE  
Atlanta, GA 30312-1525;  
404-331-5190  
www.nps.gov/malu

National Park Service information: www.nps.gov